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Making History

The incoming first-year class is Illinois Wesleyan's most diverse ever.

Story by KIM HILL



Students had a chance to relax and unwind at karaoke night during MALANA orientation in August.

August 27 marked the first day of college classes for the Class of 2016, the most diverse Illinois Wesleyan University has ever celebrated.

In all, 528 young adults are new to campus this fall, including 105 MALANA students. MALANA is an acronym for IWU's racially underrepresented population: students who identify themselves as multiracial, African-American, Latino-American, Asian-American, or Native American. In addition, 25 new international students enrolled this fall at Illinois Wesleyan.

The Class of 2016 marks the most successful result of the University's efforts to create a more diverse campus, said Tony Bankston '91, dean of admissions. "We wanted to create a campus where students were not all from the same place or background or ideology."

Wesleyan's diversity goal, endorsed by the Board of Trustees in 2004, strives to create "a welcoming, inclusive, multicultural campus where all community members appreciate and respect the diversity of the nation and the world," according to the University's strategic plan.

Strategies identified in the plan to increase and sustain a diverse campus include recruiting and retaining a diverse student body, with emphasis on racial and ethnic diversity.

"By taking a closer look at the types of students who do well here, we were mindful to look for them in places we hadn't explored before," Bankston added. "We asked ourselves, 'How do we present the benefits of IWU to a wider and more diverse population?' We wanted to cast a wider net."

One example of the "wider net" is the Chicago Public Schools system. "We have dedicated the resources for visits and college fairs there that could yield students who bring the richness of their backgrounds to our campus," Bankston explained.

Another example is Wesleyan's College Quest program, which assists capable students from Chicago and other districts in searching and applying to colleges.

“In the recruitment process we attempt to be very open about the college experience at Wesleyan,” said Bankston. “We get prospective students in contact with others of similar backgrounds.”

Many members of the Class of 2016 started their college experiences by attending MALANA student orientation or the Emerging Diversity program. Held in August prior to orientation for all new students, MALANA orientation offers incoming students the opportunity to meet current Titans, faculty and staff, and provides them with the resources to have a successful first year.

“This program offers MALANA students a chance to connect with people with whom they have a cultural affinity, so they can build a network from a level of comfort,” said Bankston.

The Emerging Diversity program, launched in 2010, invites interested white students from the incoming class to help them understand and meaningfully engage diversity while at Illinois Wesleyan.

Such efforts, combined with the strength of the staff at the University’s Office of Multicultural Student Affairs (OMSA), have contributed to a freshman-to-sophomore retention rate of 89 percent among MALANA students, Bankston said. (Freshman-to-sophomore retention ratio for the overall student body is 90 percent.) The OMSA assists students in their educational and personal development and works to foster a campus wide appreciation for diversity and a shared understanding of different cultures.

Bankston adds that the average American College Test (ACT) composite score for first-year students is 28 out of a possible 36, a statistic that has remained the same as the student body has grown more diverse. Similarly, students in the Class of 2016 on average ranked in the top 15 percent of their high school graduating classes, a percentage consistent with entering classes in years past.



Recruitment and retention of a more diverse student body has been aided by the programming and mission of the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. George E. Jackson III (above) became OMSA director in July.

Adding to the geographic diversity are new students this year from 18 states and 12 countries including China, Nigeria, Colombia and Morocco. At the New Student Convocation, Karla Carney-Hall, vice president of student affairs and dean of students, praised the students for their variety of talents and experiences, noting that the new class included: a U.S. Army veteran who served in Iraq, a student who spent 45 days in northern Canada with no cell phone, a young woman who took a gap year aboard a Mercy Ship delivering aid to Africa and a student who has 20,000 followers on Facebook.

The distinctions among the students in the Class of 2016 reflect the University's underlying goal of a more diverse campus. "The world can be viewed from hundreds or even thousands of lenses," Bankston said. "A person understands more about the world if he or she has experienced more of the world. How much richer the experience if you view the world from more than your own lens.

"We expect our alumni to go out and change the world in a truly positive way," Bankston added. "At the very least, they will need to live and learn with people of diverse backgrounds. How can we expect them to do that if our own campus does not?"

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